

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION AF-18

INFO OCT-01 EUR-25 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07

H-03 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-10 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01

SPC-03 SS-20 USIA-15 DRC-01 /132 W

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R 061155Z JAN 74

FM AMEMBASSY JIDDA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5828

INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE

AMEMBASSY NOUCHOTT

AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

S E C R E T JIDDA 0037

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, GB, OVIP, SA

SUBJ: VISIT OF PRESIDENT BONGO OF GABON TO SAUDI ARABIA

REF: LIBREVILLE 1180

1. SAUDI FOREIGN MINISTER OMAR SAQQAF TOLD AMBASSADOR JAN 1 THAT PRESIDENT BONGO OF GABON HAD INFORMED THE SAG THAT HE INTENDED TO COME TO MECCA ON A SELF-PROCLAIMED "STATE VISIT" COMBINED WITH A PILGRIMAGE. HE SAID THE KING HAD SENT AN URGENT MESSAGE TO THE NEWLY CONVERTED MOSLEM, BONGO, AND POINTED OUT THAT IN THE MOSLEM BELIEF ALL MOSLEMS WERE EQUAL; THE HAJ (THE ANNUAL MOSLEM PILGRIMAGE) WAS THE EPITOME OF THIS TENET; THE KORAN AND THE TRADITIONS WERE SPECIFIC ON THIS SUBJECT; EVEN DRESS WAS PRESCRIBED DURING THE HAJ, KINGS AND PAUPERS WORE THE SAME SIMPLE GARB; NO SOCIAL OR HIERACHERICAL DISTINCTIONS COULD BE RECOGNIZED DURING THE HAJ. IN SHORT, A STATE VISIT DURING THE PILGRIMAGE SEASON WAS NOT POSSIBLE. SAQQAF SAID RATHER HELPLESSLY THAT BONGO WAS

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COMING ANYWAY. FURTHERMORE, HE WAS BEING ACCOMPANIED BY

AND ENTOURAGE OF MINISTERS, MOST OF WHOM WERE CHRISTIAN,
AND THEY PROPOSED CALLING ON THE KING IN MECCA.

2. SAQQAF SAID THAT IT WOULDN'T BE POSSIBLE TO STRETCH
THE TRADITIONS OF ISLAM THAT FAR, EVEN FOR A COUNTRY AS
IMPORTANT AS GABON.

3. SAQQAF SAID HE WAS BAFFLED BY THE BONGO CONVERSION
TO ISLAM, ALTHOUGH HE SAID HE SHOULD BE FLATTERED AS
BONGO HAD TAKEN HIS NAME, "OMAR", AS HIS NEW MOSLEM NAME.
GABON HAS FEW MOSLEMS, AND SO HIS CONVERSION COULD NOT
HAVE BEEN AN ATTEMPT TO WIN DOMESTIC MOSLEM SUPPORT.
HIS COUNTRY WAS RELATIVELY RICH, SO HE WOULDN'T NEED
TO LOOK FOR HAND-OUTS FROM FAISAL.

4. THE AMBASSADOR SAID THESE WERE MUSING WHICH HIS KING
WOULD NOT BE MAKING. IT WAS UNWORTHY OF SAQQAF TO THINK
THAT CONVERSION WAS FOR ANY OTHER REASON THAN THAT
PRESIDENT BONGO HAD SEEN THE LIGHT OF THE TRUE RELIGION.
SAQQAF SMILED AND SAID THAT THIS EXPLANATION HAD NOT
OCCURED TO HIM. HE HAD MET BONGO, AND HE STRUCK HIM AS
A PLAYBOY, "A VAIN DWARF WEARING HIGH HEELS," NOT SOME-
ONE ATTRACTED BY THE KORAN.

5. IN ANY CASE, BONGO WILL RUN STIFF COMPETITION IN
MECCA. PRESIDENT NIMIERI OF THE SUDAN AND VARIOUS OTHER
DIGNITARIES AND MINISTERS OF LONGER MOSLEM TRADITION
ARE ALSO HERE AS (MORE OR LESS) SIMPLE PILGRIMS.

6. COMMENT: BONGO MAY BE TRANSFERRING SOME OF HIS EARLIER
CHRISTIAN TRAINING TO ISLAM, BUT IF SO, HE IS MISTAKEN.
THERE IS NO ISLAMIC TRADITION OF KILLING THE CALF FOR
THE RETURNING PRODIGAL; NO TRADITION OF ANGELS REJOICING
WHEN ONE SINNER IS RESTORED TO THE FOLD. ISLAM IS MORE
ABSENCE OF CONVERSION IN A FRIEND WHICH IS TO BE RE-
GRETTED; CONVERSION IS NATURAL. THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS, OF
COURSE, AND MANY PRIVATE CONVERSIONS ARE GREATLY WELCOMED
AND ADMIRERD, BUT BONGO WOULD BE WRONG TO THINK HIS CON-
VERSION WOULD WIN HIM EITHER RESPECT OR LARGE LOANS

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FROM SAUDI ARABIA. LIBYA'S QADDHAFI MAY BE MORE IMPRESSED
BUT QADDHAFI'S RECORD OF ASSITANCE TO SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
IS NOT GOOD. (IN EVENT, BONGO MADE PILGRIMAGE, AND MET
WITH KING FAISAL; EVENTS WHICH COVERED ON SAUDI TV
EVENING JANUARY 5.)
AKINS

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